



From Fascination To Apathy: Our Feelings About The Moon

Joelle Renstrom
06/26/2017

It's easy to understand why humans have long been obsessed with the moon. It's the biggest, brightest object in the nighttime sky, and because it changes shapes, it seems almost alive—a notion reinforced by the faces observed on its surface, as well as the mythological “man in the moon.”

2,000 years ago, the Greek explorer Pytheas discovered the relationship between the moon and the tides, a phenomenon later explained by Sir Isaac Newton. Back in the 1200s, people thought the moon's phases induced a special illness they called lunacy. Countless science fiction novels depict aliens living on the moon, deepening the mystery around Earth's satellite.



Credit: NASA

But these days, the moon is like that toy we received on our fifth birthday: after a period of obsession, we've set it aside. Is the moon not as interesting as we initially thought? What accounts for our ambivalence? Will we return to it again with fresh eyes and imaginations?

Humans once believed the moon could harbor life, but in 1753 a Croatian astronomer

confirmed that the moon has no atmosphere. Yet that didn't seem to deter our fascination. Jules Verne's 1865 novel, *From Earth to the Moon*, features a space cannon that launches humans to the moon's surface, a riveting journey despite the lack of life there. In Georges Méliès' 1902 film, *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, humans use similar technology to land on the moon, where they find a race of Selenites ruled by a king, whom the humans kill before escaping. These stories suggest that human ingenuity played an integral role in our moon obsession—we wanted to see if we could get there.

Manifest Destiny, having exhausted itself on the American continent and across the globe, was directed upward. Going to the moon was a tantalizing idea, particularly in the face of skepticism about our ability to achieve something so audacious. In John F. Kennedy's famous 1962 moonshot speech, he quotes George Mallory, the first person to climb Mount Everest, who put his motivation simply: "Because it is there." That may not sound particularly inspiring, but it encapsulates the human spirit to do something *because we can* because the

mere presence of an obstacle is itself a reason to overcome it. “Why, some say, the moon?” Kennedy asked in one of the most famous passages of the speech. “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.”

“WHY, SOME SAY, THE MOON?”

When Kennedy made that speech the U.S. and the USSR were deep in the Cold War. The Soviet Union was **leading the Space Race**, having launched Sputnik in 1957, the first person to go to space in 1961, the first manned spaceflight in 1962, and probes to Mars, Venus, and to lunar orbit. Because the rocket technology to launch satellites and space shuttles is also used to launch missiles, technological and military were one in the same. Kennedy capitalized on both patriotism and Cold War fears by vowing to beat the USSR to the moon, and by suggesting that space would be filled with “weapons of mass destruction,” if the U.S. didn’t get there first.



President John F. Kennedy in his historic message to a joint session of the Congress, on May 25, 1961, declared, "...I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth." Credit: NASA

Explore

Despite the associated expenses, including a tax hike, Americans supported this goal because the consequences of not supporting it were clear. NASA received a bigger piece of the government funding pie in the mid-60s than it has before or since. The Apollo missions captivated people across the world. We all know the story of Neil Armstrong's "giant leap for mankind." We've seen the dramatizations and the footage. Yet the [last man to walk on the moon](#) was Gene Cernan, back in 1972. Was setting foot on the moon really only about political posturing?

Carl Sagan wondered what caused our dwindling motivation for [exploring the moon](#). "We haven't been back since 1972," he wrote in his book *Cosmic Connection*.

"Why? Were we disappointed with the result? Or was it just to win the space race? ... [M]ere general exploration does not yet motivate pervasive public



**WHAT DOES ROBERT BIGELOW
KNOW ABOUT ALIENS THAT THE
REST OF US DON'T?**

NASA JUST UNVEILED GRIPPING
PHOTOS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

URANUS' MAGNETOSPHERE
FLIPS LIKE A SWITCH EVERY DAY

SPACEX ACHIEVES BICOASTAL
LAUNCHES, PUSHES TOWARD
RAPID REUSABILITY

FROM FASCINATION TO APATHY:
OUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE
MOON

interest in space. For many, the rocks returned from the Moon were a great disappointment. They were seen as merely rocks... What value does the moon, and exploring it, actually have for us?"

That last question is the kicker. The word “value” is no mistake, given the expense of space missions. NASA struggled to justify the existence of the Apollo program and both funding for and interest in the moon plummeted in the beginning of the 1970s. But to put Sagan’s question another way, how much do we really know about the moon after the six Apollo missions that brought astronauts there? Those crews explored only five percent of the moon’s surface—what is the other 95% like? What new questions arose because of what they learned, or didn’t learn?

The answer: we don’t know, and it’s extremely expensive to find out. NASA had other priorities, such as building Skylab and space shuttles.



The Lunar Roving Vehicle (LRV) gets a speed workout by astronaut John W. Young in the "Grand Prix" run during the first Apollo 16 extravehicular activity (EVA) at the Descartes landing site. Credit: NASA

George W. Bush's [Constellation Program](#) put the moon back in our sights. He wanted to use the moon as a base for other missions and vowed to start sending robotic missions by 2008 and humans by 2020. His plan was to use the Crew Exploration Vehicle—now called Orion—which is still being tested and is [expected to make a maiden voyage](#) around 2019. Bush saw a return to the moon as an investment: "Establishing an extended human presence on the moon could vastly reduce the costs of further space exploration, making possible ever more ambitious missions... Spacecraft assembled and provisioned on the moon could escape its far lower gravity using far less energy, and thus, far less cost." He argued that the moon should serve as a proving ground for technologies and approaches that might get humans to Mars and beyond.

But such long-term plans are tricky, [especially for term-limited presidents](#). Indeed, before any of those moon-related objectives were realized, Obama canceled the Constellation Program and steered space priorities in another direction. It didn't seem that the public was all that excited about the prospect of returning to the moon either, perhaps because it didn't buy the idea of the moon as a gateway to the rest of the solar system, or because the idea of traveling beyond our

satellite is too difficult to process. Perhaps the prospect of grabbing a fistful of moon dust doesn't excite people. Maybe it's no different than obtaining fossils on Earth—theoretically or historically interesting, sure, but not directly relevant to the lives of people living, breathing, and dying on Earth.



Earth and Moon as Viewed by Mariner 10. Credit: NASA

The lack of enthusiasm around the returning to the moon, as well as the U.S. economic recession, led to Obama's cancellation of Bush's plans. In his speech about the future of NASA, Obama set his sights on crewed missions to asteroids and to Mars—both with timelines beyond his tenure. "I understand that some believe that we should attempt a return to the surface of the Moon first, as previously planned," he said, prefacing this pivot: "But I just

have to say pretty bluntly here: We've been there before... There's a lot more of space to explore, and a lot more to learn when we do." Given that a successful moon landing has long been regarded as part of Kennedy's legacy, despite him not being alive to see it, it's understandable that Obama would shoot for something more memorable than a return to the moon. Yet perhaps the most fundamental development in space exploration during Obama's presidency is the [increasingly pivotal role of private companies](#) such as SpaceX.

The recession highlighted the million-dollar question with regards to space: why spend all that money exploring the cosmos—the benefits of which are uncertain and often abstract—when there's so much on Earth that needs it? The Obama years provided no compelling answer to that question, at least outside of scientific circles. Neil deGrasse Tyson acknowledges this reality: "It's sad but true that one of the biggest drivers fueling the space program in the 1960s was the Cold War. We don't remember it that way; instead, we remember it as, 'We're Americans, and we're explorers.' What actually happened was that Sputnik lit a flame under our buns."

But these days, there is no such flame. If humans continue to wreak havoc on the planet, we may eventually need to figure out somewhere else to call home. But such far-off futures have proven to be unmoving—look at the number of people who shrug off climate change worries because they'll be long gone by then. Again, it seems as though competition could serve as the great motivator—specifically, the rise of China as a space superpower.



U.S. President Barack Obama, accompanied by members of Congress and middle school children, waves as he talks on the phone from the Roosevelt Room of the White House to astronauts on the International Space Station, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2010 in Washington. Credit: NASA

In Tyson’s “Space as Culture” speech, he notes how motivating an international threat could be: “if China wants to put military bases on Mars, we will be there in ten months. You just have to leak that memo—doesn’t even have to be true. One month to fund design and build the craft, and we will be on Mars in nine months. We already understand our resolve when we feel threatened.”

But even in terms of national prestige and demonstrating technological prowess, the U.S. might feel insecure in its position, especially where China is concerned. The Chinese Yutu rover landed in late 2013 and remained operational (though immobile), until July 2016. China launched Tiangong 2, [its space laboratory](#), last year, and has plans to put both astronauts and a base on the moon. Such designs may push NASA to re-prioritize the moon and could generate public interest.

While Tyson recognizes that military might or competition might entice a return to the moon,

his own justification is far more practical. “We need to go back to the Moon,” he argues. “We haven’t left low Earth orbit recently. We have to remind ourselves how to do that—how to do it well, how to do it efficiently. We also have to figure out how to set up base camp and sustain life in a place other than Earth or low Earth orbit. The moon is a relatively easy place to get to and test all this out.”

Despite the buzz about sending astronauts to Mars, Tyson realistically notes that sending people to the Red Planet when we haven’t been beyond the ISS in 40 years is like asking a two-year-old to run hurdles before he’s walked across the room. Perhaps if people get excited about a crewed mission to Mars, they’ll embrace the necessity of returning to the moon. On the other hand, billing something as “practice” doesn’t tend to fire people up, regardless of how prudent it is.

Ultimately, our ambivalence toward the moon is about one thing: relevance (or lack thereof).

During the Cold War, when we feared the USSR might use its technological capabilities to spy from space, to broadcast communist propaganda around the world, or to launch weapons, the moon's symbolic significance was vastly outweighed by its practical significance. Kennedy successfully couched the Apollo missions as a matter of life or death. Never since has the moon mattered so much. If we were to discover alien life there or if another country decided to build a base there, then our views might shift accordingly. If a crewed Mars mission generates enough widespread excitement, maybe the moon would become germane once again. But until and unless that happens, astronomers may have to think about the moon the way some people think about lovers from long ago—that it was good while it lasted.

Explore

[Featured Posts](#)

[Space History](#)

[The Moon](#)

